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ABSTRACT

Two major developments in the therapeutic massage and bodywork profession have recently brought to the forefront the issue of research competencies. The profession has been called to a potentially heightened level of credibility. One challenge to the profession's development is that of coordinating the various curricular, instructional, organizational, and resource dimensions essential to advancing massage therapy research competencies. The paper suggests a multi-dimensional framework intended to initiate critical discussions of how to proceed. The framework's eight dimensions are: curricular and instructional contexts for teaching massage therapy research competencies (MTRCs); application tasks for demonstrating MTRCs; learning activities for enhancing MTRCs; print, electronic, and personal resources for promoting MTRCs; types of massage therapy research in documents; potential research strategies; potential areas of inquiry in massage therapy research; and organizational contexts for supporting massage therapy research. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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Advancing Massage Therapy Research Competencies: Dimensions for Thought and Action

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Abstract

Two major developments in the therapeutic massage and bodywork profession have recently brought to the forefront, in a most comprehensive fashion, the issue of *research competencies*. Specifically, the efforts of (a) the AMTA Foundation's Massage Research Agenda Workgroup and (b) COMTA's competency-based standards inclusive of a research component have called the profession to a potentially heightened level of credibility. Accompanying such an opportunity for our profession's development, though, are challenges still to be successfully deliberated and acted upon. One such challenge is that of coordinating the various curricular, instructional, organizational, and resource dimensions essential to advancing massage therapy research competencies. Accordingly, this paper suggests a multi-dimensional framework intended to initiate critical discussions of how we might now proceed.

Advancing Massage Therapy Research Competencies: Dimensions for Thought and Action

"I never faced a Problem which was more than the eternal problem of finding order" (Skinner, as cited in Gage, 1963, p.88).

Although the actual context of B. F. Skinner's quote was that of his dissenting from any overly formal view of the scientific method, its utterance came to mind as I read several recent documents leading to our profession's current commitment to promoting massage therapy research competencies (MTRCs). Allow me to explain.

The pioneering efforts of Tiffany Field (e.g.: 1998, 2000a, 2000b) in diverse areas of massage therapy research over the past decade has sounded a clarion call to all in our profession regarding the need for and ability to generate empirical evidence foundational to our work.

Additionally, the strategic decision of the AMTA Foundation to convene the multidisciplinary Massage Research Agenda Workgroup (MRAW) in 1999 has provided an excellent basis from which to proceed in our efforts to include *scientific inquiry* as still another feature of our claim as a viable form of alternative medicine. Recent reports stemming from the MRAW's deliberations have appeared in various background papers, outcome summaries, and recommendations that have been characterized by AMTA Foundation President John Balleto (as cited in Kahn, 2001a) as awe inspiring—a view with which I certainly agree.

Specifically, the MRAW-commissioned background paper by Cassidy (1998/1999) indeed set the stage by virtue of its exhaustive discussion of the complex and multidisciplinary journey on which the workgroup was embarking. Recently, Kahn's (2001a, 2001b) two synthesizing articles have served to report in a comprehensive way the outcomes and

recommendations of the workgroup and, thereby, to acknowledge publicly the charge that we now face as a profession. Another related work of recent vintage indeed germane to the above-cited reports is the comprehensive chapter on "Massage Therapy" by Freeman (2001) appearing in *Mosby's Complementary & Alternative Medicine: A Research-Based Approach.*

Dovetailing with the efforts of the MRAW has been the recent work of the Commission on Massage Therapy Accreditation (COMTA) as it reviewed various competency-based standards for massage therapy and bodywork education and the implied professional skills that must be ensured as a precondition for licensing/certification. These developments have been reported in depth by Ostendorf and Schwartz (2001) in anticipation of the established implementation date of 1 March 2003.

Among the newly-established professional competencies is that of a research-based standard that is detailed as follows (C. Ostendorf, personal communication via e-mail, June 13, 2001; Ostendorf & Schwartz, 2001, p. 120):

> *Element 6.3*: Demonstrate the ability to read and evaluate technical information found in articles in health related journals and determine biases and limitations in the findings or premises the articles are based on.
>
> *I.* Explain the value of research to the profession.
>
> *II.* Locate research literature on therapeutic massage.
>
> *III.* Critically read and evaluate a published research article in the field of massage therapy/bodywork.
>
> *IV.* Access appropriate information resources as needed, and apply this information in practice.

It is to this particular standard that the remainder of this paper speaks.

Dimensions Essential to Advancing Massage Therapy Research Competencies

Admittedly, the research focus in this paper is on only a small segment of the newly-mandated competencies, yet the implications for implementation are far-reaching and complex due to two basic realities:

1. Massage therapy and bodywork students appear to constitute an extremely heterogeneous group with respect to educational background, occupational experience, and professional goals. Accordingly, all aspects of educating pre-service therapists in the realm of research competencies must be informed by the extensive diversity among those we teach.
2. In addition to pre-service therapists, another obvious population in need of research competency enhancement includes both massage therapy educators and in-service therapists already licensed/certified. Our concern, then, must encompass not only curricular and instructional accommodations within massage therapy schools but also easily-accessible opportunities for continuing educational experiences for colleagues already practicing in the field.

Although these two concerns are indeed quite challenging, there are other realms that must be considered as we design and implement strategies for advancing massage therapy research competencies (MTRCs) in our profession. These additional considerations cut across not only other curricular and instructional issues but also matters pertinent to resource materials and personnel, varieties of research documents and strategies, areas of inquiry, and organizational contexts for supporting massage therapy research. With this in mind, then, Table 1 presents a framework from which we might begin the necessary work on those several dimensions suggested here as essential to advancing MTRCs in our profession. And even if Skinner is only partially correct in his view of ". . . the eternal problem of finding order," then

certainly our task is well-defined as we try to bring order and clarity to all that is implied within and across these eight dimensions.

Dimension #1—Curricular & Instructional Contexts for Teaching MTRCs

This first dimension focuses on those curricular and instructional contexts in which MTRCs might be taught (see Table 2). Perhaps the most basic context is that of a core research course being included in the massage therapy school's curricular offerings. Positioned among the initial courses completed in a massage therapy program would allow for concurrent and subsequent coursework to build on those research skills developed at the outset of one's studies. A possible follow up to this core research course might be that of a research skills module as part of specific massage therapy courses.

Another possible context for teaching MTRCs is that of continuing education workshops. This would be an appropriate route not only for massage therapy educators preparing to infuse their curriculum with research-focused modules, but also for in-service practitioners whose earlier education predated the current research emphasis. Finally, an additional context involves networking seminars for interested health care professionals who might have overlapping interests in the research agendas of massage therapists.

Dimension #2—Application Tasks for Demonstrating MTRCs

The second dimension involves those possible tasks by which one might demonstrate an application of research competencies appropriate to the massage therapy profession (see Table 3). One fairly obvious tasks here is that of being able to "consume"—i.e., search, access, retrieve, critique, and use—the available massage therapy research literature. This, of course, would be a minimal type of activity in which all massage therapists would want to be proficient so as to position their own practice on a more informed-by-research basis. Perhaps an even more ambitious task in this dimension is that of massage therapists refining their research skills to the

point of being able to contribute in an active fashion to the research literature as part of a multidisciplinary research team.

Dimension #3—Learning Activities for Enhancing MTRCs

This third dimension among eight centers on those learning activities most appropriate for enhancing MTRCs (see Table 4). The practice of actually conducting and evaluating professional literature searches is foundational to developing research competency in any profession or discipline. Essential to this activity–and actually building on it– is that of critiquing published massage therapy research documents in accordance with well-established criteria. These two foundational learning activities, in turn, make possible two additional activities at a more advanced level; viz., authoring a massage therapy proposal and participating in the implementation of a research study as a member of a professionally diversified team.

Dimension #4—Print, Electronic, & Personnel Resources for Promoting MTRCs

The fourth dimension essential to advancing MTRCs pertains to those print, electronic, and human resources appropriate to scientific inquiry within our profession. The elements listed here in Table 5 are fairly apparent; however, their acknowledgment certainly cannot hurt and does serve as a reminder of the vast array of resources—material and human—to which we can appeal .

Of special note in this dimension are several books that focus on the research process applied to the health sciences in general and/or manual therapies in particular. These resources might provide a starting point as we begin the complicated process of determining content coverage, instructional context, and learning activities most appropriate to both pre-service and in-service therapists. Although somewhat of a "sampler" at this point, these resources meriting our attention are the following: Domholdt's (2000) *Physical Therapy Research*; Helewa and Walker's (2000) *Critical Evaluation of Research in Physical Rehabilitation;* Hicks' (1999) *Research Methods for Clinical Therapists*; Jenkins, Price, Straker, and Twomey's (1998) *The*

Researching Therapist; Kazdin's (1998) *Methodological Issues and Strategies in Clinical Research*; and Polzar and Thomas' (2000) *Introduction to Research in the Health Sciences*.

Dimension #5—Types of Massage Therapy Research Documents

Dimension #5 specifies those varied types of massage therapy research documents that constitute the range of professional literature essential to promoting MTRCs (see Table 6). An obvious starting point is a genre of reference materials known as preliminary sources (e.g., Medline, PsycInfo, Sociological Abstracts, and the newly-launched AMTA Foundation's Massage Therapy Research Database) that are accessible via on-line computer searches employing descriptor terms leading to bibliographic citations and accompanying abstracts. Empirical research reports, typically in the form of journal articles, provide both quantitative and qualitative analyses of research questions that have been operationalized and investigated via established scientific procedures ensuring both validity and reliability. Theoretical/conceptual works often represent a synthesis of earlier empirical studies in terms of explanatory themes and, in turn, provide a rationale for continued empirical research. Finally, state-of-the-art literature reviews provide an exhaustive coverage of both empirical and theoretical/conceptual studies in an attempt to synthesize past and current work in a given area of inquiry.

Dimension #6—Potential Research Strategies

The sixth dimension considered here is that of potential research strategies that may be used depending primarily on the nature of one's research question (see Table 7). A difference-oriented research strategy in its most basic form investigates the relationship between an independent variable (e.g, some form of treatment intervention) and a dependent variable (e.g., some outcome measure of interest), with its methodological options including true experimental, quasi-experimental, and ex post facto. The association-oriented research strategy employs methods typically labeled as correlational studies and predictive studies, each of which may function as a prelude to a difference-oriented study. The descriptive-oriented research strategy is

frequently the initial focus in an evolving research problem area and spans such methods as the following: case studies, observational studies, surveys, archival research, and content analyses. The complete array of research strategies, then, is available and should be reflective of the type of research question being investigated.

Dimension #7—Potential Areas of Inquiry in Massage Therapy Research

The seventh dimension speaks to that vast array of potential areas of inquiry for massage therapy researchers. The recent works of Cassidy (1998/1999), Freeman (2001), and Kahn (2001a, 2001b) provide the backdrop for those varied areas listed in Table 8. Priority areas of safety and efficacy studies, along with primary and secondary prevention studies from both pathogenic and salutogenic (wellness) models, define to a large extent where we have been and where we need to expand. Inherent in each of these areas just cited is an underlying condition-treatment interface that ultimately must be addressed and understood in terms of explanatory mechanisms (see Field, 2000b). And, of course, there is the realm of therapeutic massage profession studies so essential to our continued advancement and credibility, yet so lacking in past attention among researchers.

Dimension #8—Organizational Contexts for Supporting Massage Therapy Research

The eighth and final dimension considered here is that of organizational contexts for supporting massage therapy research (see Table 9). From international, national, regional, and state massage therapy associations to highly-focused special interest groups within a given association, the strength and support found in numbers of a collegial nature cannot be overestimated. Additionally, collaboration among massage therapy schools as well as accrediting associations can certainly further appropriate standards across diverse settings in the never-ending quest for professional excellence. And looking beyond the massage therapy profession per se, our work can indeed be strengthened if and when alliances are forged with the schools, associations, and settings of other health care professionals.

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Reactions to this paper are indeed encouraged as well as suggestions for collaborative efforts in the many areas of inquiry challenging the massage and bodywork profession today.

Table 1

Overview of Dimensions Essential to Advancing Massage Therapy Research Competencies (MTRCs)

Dimension #1—Curricular & Instructional Contexts for Teaching MTRCs
Dimension #2—Application Tasks for Demonstrating MTRCs
Dimension #3—Learning Activities for Enhancing MTRCs
Dimension #4—Print, Electronic, & Personnel Resources for Promoting MTRCs
Dimension #5—Varieties of Massage Therapy Research Documents
Dimension #6—Potential Research Strategies
Dimension #7—Potential Areas of Inquiry in Massage Therapy Research
Dimension #8—Organizational Contexts for Supporting Massage Therapy Research

Table 2

Dimension #1—Curricular & Instructional Contexts for Teaching MTRCs

1a.	Research Core Course Positioned in the Massage Therapy Curriculum
1b.	Research Module Embedded in Specific Massage Therapy Courses
1c.	Continuing Education Workshops for Massage Therapy Educators
1d.	Continuing Education Workshops for In-Service Massage Therapy Practitioners
1e.	Networking Seminars for Affiliated Health Care Professionals

Table 3

Dimension #2—Application Tasks for Demonstrating MTRCs

2a.	Critical Consumer of the Massage Therapy Research Literature
2b.	Active Contributor to the Massage Therapy Research Literature

Table 4

Dimension #3—Learning Activities for Enhancing MTRCs

3a.	Conducting & Evaluating Literature Searches
3b.	Critiquing Published Massage Therapy Research
3c.	Authoring a Massage Therapy Research Proposal
3d.	Participating As a Multidisciplinary Research Team Member

Table 5

Dimension #4—Print, Electronic, & Personnel Resources for Promoting MTRCs

4a.	Authored Books
4b.	Entries in Edited Books
4c.	Journal Articles
4d.	Conference Papers
4e.	Theses & Dissertations
4f.	Technical Reports
4g.	Monographs, Newsletters, & Bulletins
4h.	Web- and Electronic-Based Sources
4i.	Professional Colleagues & Associations/Organizations

Table 6

Dimension #5—Types of Massage Therapy Research Documents

5a.	Preliminary Reference Sources
5b.	Empirical Research Reports
5c.	Theoretical/Conceptual Treatises
5d.	State-of-the-Art Literature Review Documents

Table 7

Dimension #6—Potential Research Strategies

6a. Difference-Oriented Research Strategy

- 6a.1 True Experimental Studies
- 6a.2 Quasi-Experimental Studies
- 6a.3 Ex Post Facto Studies

6b. Association-Oriented Research Strategy

- 6b.1 Correlational Studies
- 6b.2 Predictive Studies

6c. Descriptive-Oriented Research Strategy

- 6c.1 Case Studies
- 6c.2 Observational Studies
- 6c.3 Surveys
- 6c.4 Archival Studies
- 6c.5 Content Analyses

Table 8

Dimension #7—Potential Areas of Inquiry for Massage Therapy Researchers

7a.	Priority Areas of Safety & Efficacy Studies
7b.	Primary & Secondary Prevention Studies from Both Pathogenic & Salutogenic (Wellness) Models
7c.	Condition-Treatment Interface Studies
7d.	Explanatory Mechanism Studies
7e.	Therapeutic Massage Profession Studies

Table 9

Dimension #8—Organizational Contexts for Supporting Massage Therapy Research

8a.	International & National Massage Therapy Associations
8b.	Regional & State Massage Therapy Associations
8c.	Special Interest Groups (SIGs) within Professional Associations
8d.	Massage Therapy Schools & Accrediting Associations
8e.	Medical, Nursing, Chiropractic, Physical Therapy, & Occupational Therapy Schools
8f.	Related Health Profession Associations
8g.	Hospital & Health Clinic Networks